CHILD HYGIENE

Childhood and the Depression

IT is high time to take stock of what is happening to the childhood of our country in this prolonged period of depression. So many loose and ill-advised statements have been made recently regarding the "high health" of American children, that we should turn to those who are in intimate daily contact with medical and social problems, in order to correct false impressions.

While it is true that the infant mortality rate has continued to decline and that the babies of this country have been, on the whole, well provided for, it by no means indicates that our preschool and school children are in a satisfactory condition. On the contrary, reports coming in from various sections of the country state that malnutrition and undernutrition appear to be on the increase, and that it is only through heroic efforts to feed our school population that the children are barely kept from stepping over the starvation line. But physical deterioration is not the only effect of such a period. Social maladjustments and delinquency are multiplying. The widespread uncertainty and instability of family life seriously affect the children.

The results of depression upon childhood have been set forth clearly in a pamphlet published by the National Education Association.* After discussing the financing of education during this depression, the report takes up the increased responsibilities of auxiliary school services.

Along with the increase in attendance, many public school systems are being called upon to operate or to supervise the operation of special non-educational and relief services. Like the increase in attendance, this tendency is merely a temporarily accelerated part of a movement to assign ever increasing child welfare responsibilities to the schools. Whether such responsibilities are a legitimate school function is not the question at issue. The facts are that such relief functions have frequently been allotted to the schools, and that current economic conditions make this work more difficult and expensive. Perhaps the most important relief function assigned to the schools is the supplying of clothing and one or more meals daily to destitute children.

In a few cities the actual operating expense of these services is assumed by the school system, but in most cases the food and clothing are supplied through the American National Red Cross, the American Friends Society, or through other national or local relief agencies. The cost of administering the relief, however, is often handled in part or whole through the school budget. Other auxiliary school services which are probably carrying an unusually increased load due to the depression include: medical and dental clinics, school nurses' services, vocational guidance, libraries, social case work, and free textbooks and supplies for indigent children.

An important phase of the relief work for which schools are being held responsible is the financial contribution of the teaching profession to local relief funds. On September 18, 1931, the President of the National Education Association issued a message on relief, commending the activities of teachers in relief work and urging "that every member of the profession extend immediate aid to make effective the plans and policies of regularly constituted relief agencies." While even an estimate of the amount contributed by teachers to relief work is impossible, the total is certainly a large one. A few examples will serve to show the general nature of the work done.

In New York City, for example, the school relief fund contributed by the school employees was $452,000 in 1930–1931 and $1,000,000 in 1931–1932. Teachers forwarded to the relief committee 2 or 3 per cent of their salaries. The extent of the school relief program may be glimpsed from the following facts for 1930–1931. Many of these figures will be more than doubled in 1931–1932.

* *Childhood and the Depression*, National Education Association, Washington, D. C.

Free lunches served in a single week	9,800
Pairs of shoes distributed	61,500
Garments distributed	120,000
Cost of milk and crackers, alone	$26,000

The responsibilities of the teachers are suggested by the following statement:

> Teachers and other employees are to detect and investigate need and extend immediate help. Thus the teachers are at once contributors to the huge charity fund, the social workers that discover and inquire into the poor pupils' wants, the direct disbursers of free lunches, shoes, and clothing, and also the bookkeepers and administrators of the funds.

In Newark, N. J., the City Teachers Association organized, at the suggestion of the superintendent, with the approval of the Board of Education, a central relief committee. A fund of $18,851 was raised from school employees by the first appeal. Coöperation with the Social Service Bureau and with other welfare agencies was immediately established. The program of relief was maintained on a 12-month basis through 1931. A few facts concerning the work of the Newark school relief fund follow:

Pairs of shoes bought	3,170
Number of children served milk	2,853
Total number of meals served	53,328
Total number of pupils assisted	8,047

The fund was used entirely for relief, the small administrative overhead being paid for by the public school system.

From Kansas City, Mo., comes the report that teachers increased their giving to the Community Chest 75 per cent over last year. Teachers are coöperating in the relief work of the Junior Red Cross, and school nurses are paying for needed medicine when the family cannot do so. In Detroit, $26,488.81 was contributed last year to the Mayor's Unemployment Relief Fund by the teaching force and the present rate of contribution is $4,000 a month. In Chicago, 11,000 hungry school children were given food by teachers who were themselves financially embarrassed by the failure of the Board of Education to pay them.

The general scope of the program carried on in Philadelphia is suggested by the following report.

> Early in 1930 officials of the public school's medical inspection division discovered that many children were seriously undernourished. Investigation showed that hundreds were coming to school without having had breakfast. A committee of school executives was appointed to consider the situation. While it was felt that serving breakfasts in school was not of itself a function of the school system, the teachers could not instruct children who were suffering from the pangs of hunger. The principals of all schools pledged unanimous coöperation to meet the emergency. Contributions came in without solicitation. Teachers, clubs, school entertainments, interscholastic football games, and individual philanthropists contributed money and food.
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> Breakfasts were served to the children in 128 school buildings and in 3 special centers. The breakfasts were available daily, including Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays. The serving was supervised by principals and teachers in the schools, and in many cases the actual preparation and serving of the food was done by the same persons. The largest number of children served in a single day was approximately 8,600. The average gross cost of each breakfast was approximately 8 cents.
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> In order to avoid undue imposition by those not needing or deserving this care, a monthly check-up was made of each individual case. The details of the diet were worked out by the Medical Inspection Division, the Director of Home Economics, and the Director of School Lunches. The breakfasts were planned early enough in the morning so that the children thus fed might rejoin their companions before the actual opening of school, thus reducing the publicity that might attach to these children.

The work of a single school in Fresno, Calif., is thus described by its principal:

> As many children as possible are furnished lunches by the Parent Teacher Association, but many lunches are paid for by the cafeteria manager, teacher, and principal. During 1930–1931, clothing and shoes for over 25 children . . . A large part was paid for personally by interested teachers . . . Teachers this year have over-subscribed their quota to the Community Chest by 25 per cent. Teachers come in intimate daily contact with children who are hungry and not properly clothed, and they are supplying the need as best they can from their own funds. They are not giving unintelligently. Each case is investigated by the school nurse at the request of the teacher. Deserving and eligible cases are referred to the Community Chest or the County Welfare Department. But the available aid is frequently not adequate.

Then the school steps in, supplying things that are needed, through teachers, personal contributions, P. T. A. or Student Body funds—in any event supplying the need.

. . . A careful study of the effect of the current depression on child health and welfare is badly needed. Lacking an exact statement, however, we may rely on the reports of competent social workers and upon studies of child welfare made in previous depressions.

The evidence from the latter source is perhaps best represented by a study of unemployment and child welfare conducted during the industrial depression of 1921–1922.

The study attempted to show, as nearly as possible, a cross-section of conditions in the families of unemployed men in two cities in which wages had been high. Some of the conclusions follow:

1. *Lowered standard of living*—Half of the families from which complete information was secured spent for their maintenance during unemployment only one-half as much as while the father was working. "The children are drinking tea and coffee instead of milk," was a common report. Frugality in food, even to the point of actual privation, a dangerous saving of fuel, economy in clothing and household supplies, reduction of the housing cost through seeking cheaper quarters or crowding the family to secure an income from lodgers are among the results of unemployment.

2. *Employment of the mother*—Almost one-third of the mothers in the families of unemployed men were gainfully employed. Many other mothers were seeking work. Three-fourths of the working mothers were employed away from home. The absence of the mother or her pre-occupation with gainful work at home meant loss of care, protection, and supervision for the children. They went to school with insufficient breakfast, their clothing was not cared for, and they suffered ill-effects mentally and physically.

3. *Employment of children*—In one-fifth of the families studied children's earnings were a source of maintenance during the father's unemployment. Factory and clerical work claimed the larger proportion of these children. Even while fathers and mothers were most desperately seeking employment some children were leaving school and securing work.

4. *Loss of savings and accumulation of debt*—Savings of a large majority of the families studied were swept away during the period of unemployment. Patiently accumulated funds for the advanced education of the children went along with the rest. Homes and other property were lost through inability to meet payments or taxes. Insurance funds were allowed to lapse because no money was available to pay the premiums. Many of the families were heavily in debt and felt that father, mother, and children would all have to work as soon as they could find any kind of a job.

Reports compiled by the National Organization for Public Health Nursing indicate that these years of financial depression and unemployment are taking their toll in undernourishment of children. At a health center in New York City, where the percentage of undernourished children has been carefully diagnosed for 3 years, malnutrition has increased from 18 per cent to 60 per cent since 1928. Public health nurses report that their work is handicapped because parents cannot provide their children with the diet recommended. In Louisville, Ky., one agency reports a decrease of 1,000 in the number of children able to meet the health and weight standards.

The importance of stability and security in a child's life can hardly be overestimated. The Children's Charter recognized: "For every child the right to grow up in a family with an adequate standard of living and the security of a stable income as the surest safeguard against social handicaps." That this right of childhood is denied to the children of many unemployed fathers and mothers is well known. A physician has coined the expression "epidemic demoralization," to describe the sense of despair and uncertainty which descends on those who must live by the charity of others. Children share in the loss of security and feel it fully as keenly as adults. A child who discovers that his father is out of a job, that the rent is due, and that no one knows where to get money for groceries has lost that sense of protection that should surround him at all times. The personality and character of such a child may suffer permanent scars from these experiences. Even if he escapes permanent injury the child needs an unusual amount of skilled and sympathetic treatment at school. Under such conditions the school must become much more than an instructional center. It must be a steadying influence to which the child can confidently turn in time of need.

This rapid review of the forces affecting child welfare during an economic depression suggests a third responsibility of the schools growing out of the depression. The educational forces of the nation face a stirring challenge to render an increasingly effective educational service to childhood. All the evidence emphasizes the conclusion: American children need very good schools now more urgently than ever before.